TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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October 31, 2021

*“Not Far”* *Mark 12:28-34*

**As I was preparing this sermon, I found myself humming an old Carol King song called, *Way Over Yonder.* Very soon, I found another one of her songs echoing in my mind, the song called: *So Far Away.***

**For those of you who do not remember the music of the 1970s and 80s, those songs were both quite popular, and even though both of the titles express the same idea of distance, the content of each song is quite different from one another.**

**The first sings of a place where the *“good life is so easily found,”* while the second sings of loss and asks: *“doesn’t anybody stay in one place anymore?”***

**Both songs express a hunger for a physical place or a physical intimacy. One acknowledges a desire for something better, while the other sings of an emptiness that needs filling. And it made me wonder about the conversation that we heard in the passage for this morning from the Gospel of Mark.**

**Most of us know that this exchange between Jesus and the unnamed scribe comes at the end of several conversations and debates Jesus has been having with Temple officials (priests, scribes, Sadducees), and interlopers from King Herod’s circle. Jesus is in the Temple when he encounters them. Indeed, just the day before, he caused quite a stir when he kicked-out the money changers and vendors he had found there. [11:15-17] Needless to say, the Temple officials were curious about him. Interestingly enough, they are also quite cautious about him, too.**

**And so, as he and the disciples enter the Temple the next day, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders confront him asking him to explain himself. They ask him to prove to them that he has the authority to do what he has been doing. Jesus meets their challenge with one of his own—which they are not able to answer. [11:27-32]**

**Still, they persist. In the verses leading up to the passage we heard, they test him with several more leading questions. They ask him about whether it is “lawful to pay taxes to the emperor” [12:14]. The Sadducees asked him a question about the resurrection [12:18-23] even though they did not believe in it themselves.**

**All of this is verbal jousting, of course. All of it is meant to catch Jesus in a bad answer, or an answer that proves he is an apostate renegade without education, or substance, or authority.**

**Instead, he meets their challenges and offers them answers that are filled with wisdom and wit. Jesus does not let them confuse or confound him. He answers with truth and with a certainty about God and God’s compassion and righteousness that exposes their challenges for what they are.**

**In the passage we heard, someone else has been listening—an unnamed scribe who asks another question. He asks about the very heart of the faith and tradition that he and the other Temple officials, *and* Jesus are still all a part of.**

**He asks Jesus to tell him which is the greatest commandment of them all.**

**Now, a lot of commentators see this man as yet another challenger—the way the others have been. However, there are quite a few commentators these days who see this man as someone who is looking for real answers and is asking a real question. They see him as someone who has been listening and wondering about the things Jesus has said, and has begun to wonder if “there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of” in his philosophy and that of his colleagues.**

**Jesus’ answer not only satisfies the scribe, he reassures him that this new rabbi who has been causing such a stir, is not an anarchist. He is a prophet who knows Scripture and who is able to identify what is most important in it.**

**First and foremost, the scribe has heard Jesus put God before all else. Indeed, Jesus begins by reciting the first part of the *Shema—*the prayer of Judaism made up of Scripture and commanded by Scripture that it be prayed every day. It is a prayer that affirms that there is one God who is first and before all other considerations in our life.**

**Jesus also adds what he says is a close second: that we should love our neighbor as ourself. The implication is that the first will inspire the second so profoundly that the two are almost simultaneous.**

**The scribe seems to be delighted in Jesus’ answer and even adds his own conviction that** “*this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices*” [12:33]. Now, at this point, the two, Jesus and the scribe, seem quite pleased with one another. It is a good moment for both of them.

However, I find myself wondering what the scribe’s colleagues thought of this exchange. I wonder what happened to this person whom Jesus says was *“not far from the kingdom of God”* [12:33].

I also wonder at him being “not far”— but not yet there. What, I wonder (and I can’t help but believe he did, too), what remains? If he is not yet there, where is he, and how much further is there to go?

One pastor, the 1Rev. Sarah Wilson, who says this: *“all that remains is Jesus’ passion. Not an overthrowing of Israel’s faith, but an unanticipated fulfillment of it.”*

What I believe Rev. Wilson is saying is thatlove of God and love of neighbor take their deepest expression in Jesus whose life will be given-up for us—for all of mankind—for love of all of us. Indeed, his death and resurrection will open the door to new life for the whole world.

*New* life—what can that mean to you and me right now, even in the midst of *this* life? Surely it is not simply the extension of the life we know—the word “new” implies something different than what we have known.

Oddly enough, that brings me back to Carol King and her songs.

What I remember about the song, *Way Over Yonder*, what I remember it being about, is about a world that is transformed. It is new world where there is a “garden of wisdom” and where “honey runs in rivers each day.” In short, it is a world of abundance that is open to all. And a “garden of wisdom”, where people who enter in are seen and heard and valued. It is a place where we take the time to understand and cherish each other’s life.

Jesus informs the scribe that because he has already grasped the most basic of truths he is “not far” from the kingdom of heaven, not far from that “over yonder” place that Carol King sings about.

What remains is the living of that truth.

What remains is knowing and acknowledging that there are many others who have heard the same story of abundance and love, yet are not yet able to receive their fair share of it. We are “not far” but not yet there until all people have the same access.

What remains is the *living of God’s truth*. And our good news is that when we do, the “not far” place of blessing and wholeness will be the ground upon which we stand—together with all others—brought there by a God who loves us and has proved it through the life, the ministry, the death, and the resurrection of God’s only begotten child, Jesus the Christ, whose spirit goes with us as we make our way to that place of grace and righteousness.

Our good news is that the place we want and need to be is, indeed, “not far.” And my prayer for us is that we will not grow faint or weary, but will allow ourselves to be refreshed by the Spirit, and we make it to that place where God and God’s love and truth is known and lived by all.

May this be so. Amen.